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ABSTRACT

The 5-year project reported in this paper sought initially to examine the home environments both of isolated, intact rural white families and of single parent AFDC Negro families. The information thus gathered was to be compared to what is known about middle class white families in hopes of isolating the differences that result in the poorer academic performance of poor children and developing programs of parent intervention to alleviate this problem. The intervention project is presently being carried on through weekly home visits. These visits have four objectives: (1) to increase the quantity and quality of mother-child verbal interaction, (2) to instill the idea in both the mother and the child that adults are helpful, resource-controlling persons, (3) to shift the behavior control techniques from diffuse nonverbal reinforcement to verbal reinforcement with specific explanations, and (4) to have the mother encourage increased complexity in the child's language. This home teaching program lasts 12 weeks; 9 for the program, 1 for make-up, and 2 for evaluation. Field trips, singing, reading, and a wide variety of games were among the program activities. (MH)

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Analysis of Home Environment and Development of Parent Intervention

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Initially, the objectives of this five year project were stated:

1. to provide a more precise characterization of the differences between the home environments of middle-class children and the children of two subgroups of the culturally deprived:

   a. the isolated, rural, intact, poor white family, and
   b. the single parent, AFDC Negro family;

and 2. to increase our understanding of how these environmental variations are related to the educational development of the preschool-aged child by attempting to induce changes in the mother-child relationship which are aimed toward increasing the child's capacity to benefit from subsequent educational programs.

Early efforts are directed exclusively toward the accomplishment of the above two objectives with regard to the first population--the isolated, rural, poor white family of mother, father and children. We are engaged in developing instruments to describe the home environments of the target population; developing a weekly home teaching program designed to compensate for the type of impoverishment actually present; and developing instruments to evaluate the effectiveness of this pilot home teaching program.

Four objectives are pursued through weekly visits of the home visitor:
1. Increasing the amount and complexity of verbal interaction between mother and child. Analysis of four structured observations indicated that the rural mothers and children spent significantly less time in conversation than their working class counterparts and that their children were significantly less verbally responsive.
2. Creating a conception (on the part of the mother and child) of adults as helpful, resource-controlling persons. For a child to respond appropriately to a teacher, he must generally perceive adults as having resources--in terms of information and ability to organize and direct action--which will be useful in providing gratifying experiences. In this area of the program, attempts have been made to increase the informational resources which the mother possesses and, perhaps even more importantly, to model to the mother techniques for transmitting this information and other information which she already has to her child.

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3. Changing the reinforcement patterns in the home such that the child receives more verbal reinforcement with explanations rather than diffuse non-verbal reinforcement. The interview data suggest that these families have clearly formulated, traditional standards with regard to cleanliness, orderliness, boisterous or aggressive behavior, etc. The socialization environment is not harsh, nor is it characterized by frequent use of physical punishment. However, it differs from the environment of the professional middle-class home in the relatively low use of verbal techniques such as reasoning and explanation. These mothers tend to rely upon bribery, deprivation of privileges and isolation for sanctioning behavior.
4. Increasing the complexity of the language which the mother encourages the child to use. These mothers do attempt to teach their children names of objects. However, they tend to accept rather indiscriminating labels, and to be satisfied with a unidimensional response when more than one characteristic could be pointed out.

The home teaching program consists of two twelve week units: nine weeks of program, one week for make-up of programs missed by some families and two weeks for evaluation.

Activities have included: field trips, songs, reading, activities centered around family rituals, and a large number of games--many of them original--some involving boards, cards or other props, and some requiring no equipment. Some of these activities could be carried on by the mother as she does her housework.